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‘Desires, Dispositions and the Explanation of Action’

Abstract We often explain human actions by reference to the desires of the person whose actions we are explaining: ‘Jane is studying Law because she wants to become a judge’. But how do desires explain actions? A widely accepted view is that desires are dispositional states that are manifested in behavior. Accordingly, desires explain actions as ordinary physical dispositions, such as fragility or conductivity, explain their manifestations, namely causally. This paper argues that desires are manifested both internally, in thoughts, feelings and emotional reactions, and in outward behavior and, moreover, that desires are ‘manifestation-dependent’ dispositions: dispositions whose existence depends on their having been manifested. This important feature of desires should feature in any account of how desires explain actions.

In this paper I examine a familiar conception of desires and of their role in the explanation of action. The conception is exemplified in Davidson’s influential 1963 paper ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’, which opens with the question:

What is the relation between a reason and an action when the reason explains the action by giving the agent’s reason for doing what he did? (Davidson, 1963, 685).

The answer that Davidson defended in that paper, which subsequently became the orthodoxy in action theory, is that the relation between the reason that explains an action and the explained action is that of cause and effect and that, therefore, explanations that give the agent’s reason for acting, which he called ‘rationalizations’, are ‘a species of causal explanation’ (*ibid.*). The details of the view include a conception of a reason why an agent did something. Specifically, Davison claimed that

Giving the reason why an agent did something is often a matter of naming the pro attitude (a) or the related belief (b) or both; let me call this pair the primary reason why the agent performed the action (Davidson, 1963, 686).

‘Pro attitude’ is a semi-technical term intended by Davidson to include, among other things, ‘desires, wantings, urges, promptings, (...) in so far as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent directed toward actions of a certain kind’ (1963, 686). His characterization of desires is not precise but he implicitly endorses the view that desires are dispositional states and that, like other dispositions, they are causal conditions of the actions they explain. This is evident in his response to the objection that a primary reason ‘consist of attitudes and beliefs, which are states or dispositions, not events; therefore they cannot be causes’ (1963, 693):

It is easy to reply that states, dispositions, and conditions are frequently named as the causes of events: the bridge collapsed because of a structural defect; the plane crashed on takeoff because the air temperature was abnormally high; the plate broke because it had a crack (694).

The gist of this response is, then, that desires and beliefs *are* states or dispositions but that doesn’t imply that they are not causes, since states and dispositions are often named as the causes of events. Perhaps, Davidson goes on to say, such states and dispositions are causes only on the assumption that there was a triggering event but, again, that does not impugn their status as causes or, more precisely, causal conditions of the events they explain.¹

The view that desires, and indeed many psychological states, are dispositional states is widely held: in fact it is often taken as obvious.² And so is the view that dispositions are causes (or causal conditions) of their manifestations: fragility is often cited as the cause of a fragile object’s breaking, solubility as the cause of the dissolving of soluble things, malleability of the change in shape of malleable things, etc.³ It is this view of desires that I shall examine in

this paper. My aim is relatively modest. I shall not argue against this view of how desires explain actions when they are cited in explanations, nor give a fully-worked out alternative. Rather, my aim is to argue that if desires are dispositions, they are dispositions with a distinctive feature that sets them apart from ordinary physical dispositions, such as fragility or conductivity and, briefly, to suggest that this feature of desires may favor a particular approach to thinking about how desires explain actions when they feature in action explanations. The structure of the paper is as follows. In §1, after some preliminary clarifications, I outline the idea that desires are dispositional states. I then (§2) examine the various ways in which desires are manifested and, in the following section (§3), I turn to the question how that manifestation relates to the presence of a desire. I suggest that the nature of that relationship makes desires into a special kind of disposition: what I call ‘manifestation-dependent’ dispositions. My concluding remarks relate this feature of desires to the question how desires explain actions.

1. Desires as dispositional states

‘Desire’ is used in philosophy in a semi-technical sense. In ordinary contemporary usage ‘desire’ is more often reserved for desires related to the natural appetites: desires for food, warmth, comfort, sleep, etc. and, in particular, for sexual desire. By contrast, in philosophy the term normally covers any state of wanting or desiring (but see Schueler, 1995). Some philosophers sometimes use ‘desire’ interchangeably with ‘pro-attitude’, while others restrict it to refer to states that form a species within that genus. In this latter usage, desires are sometimes contrasted with, say, wishes, hopes, longings or cravings. Each of those four concepts (and there are others) differs somewhat from the others as well as from the concept

of desire with which they are contrasted: the first two overlap with desire in involving a positive evaluation of their object but differ from it in that they are not tied, or not so closely, to behavior as desire is. The last two terms are less clearly linked to positive evaluation. But all of them, as well as related concepts, are generally regarded as sufficiently close to each other so that they tend to be brought together under umbrella terms such as Davidson's 'pro-attitude'.

In this paper I shall be concerned primarily with desires in the semi-technical and somewhat restricted philosophical sense just outlined. So I shall leave aside for the most part other pro-attitudes such as wishes, hopes, longings and cravings, and shall not be concerned with whether what I say about desires is also true of any of these 'pro-attitudes' or indeed of other psychological states.

A further clarification is that my focus is the concept of desire in the sense of *someone's desiring* something. It is a familiar point that the term 'desire', like many other psychological terms such as 'belief', 'conviction', 'statement', etc., suffers from what might be called a 'state/object' ambiguity or double use to the term (See Oddie, this volume). So 'my desire' may be used to talk about my desiring something, or to talk about what I desire: for instance, to talk about *my desiring* to carry the vote at a meeting, and what I desire, namely *to carry the vote at the meeting*. This paper is concerned with desires understood as a state of desiring something.

So what is it to desire something?. A common answer in the philosophical literature is that desiring something, like believing something, is or consists in, *being in a state*, namely a state of desiring.⁴ However, if desiring is being in a state, it is not a state that need be manifested throughout all the time when one has the desire. For instance, a person may have a desire for financial security over a period of time and yet, at some points in that period she may not

manifest the desire in any way: that is, she may not talk or think about it then, or be doing anything in order to satisfy the desire. Because of this, because desires are states which may be manifested in a variety of ways but which need not, at any one time, be manifested in any of those ways, it seems plausible to think of desires as *dispositional* states: states that, perhaps together with other dispositional states such as the subject's beliefs or knowledge, dispose the agent to certain forms of behavior, thoughts, mental images, emotional reactions, sensations, feelings, etc. Thus, many philosophers today think of desires as belonging to the category of dispositions, and think that they are 'multi-track' dispositions, that is that they are dispositions that can be manifested in a variety of ways. So how are desires manifested?

2. Desires and their manifestation

Let me start with a point about the notion of manifestation of a disposition. When we talk about the manifestation of a disposition, we tend to think of the occurrence of certain sorts of physical changes or processes that are related to the disposition (indeed, are defining of the disposition) – changes or processes that are in principle 'observable'.⁵ However, although this may be right for inanimate things, human psychological dispositions are different because they are dispositions that may be manifested both in observable occurrences that include, but are not limited to, purposive behavior;⁶ or they can be manifested in 'purely mental' ways, that is, in thoughts, sensations, feelings, emotional reactions, etc. that need not have any outward or public expression. Accordingly, psychological dispositions can be manifested 'externally' or 'internally' as we might say.⁷

Desires are manifested externally in what seem to be two categorical different types of

manifestation. First, they are manifested in *behavior*, which may be purposive or simply expressive.⁸ Secondly, desires are manifested in *physiological changes* in the agent that has the desire – changes that do not amount to behavior. The categorical distinction between behavior and mere physiological changes is drawn on the basis of the fact that there are things that we do that are, in principle and to some extent, under our direct control even if their occurrence is not intentional on a particular occasion, while others are never under our direct control. To illustrate: grabbing and cursing are, on this characterization, behavioral manifestations; while sweating and salivating are not – they are mere physiological changes.

The behavior that manifests desires may, in turn, be of two kinds: purposive or merely expressive (‘merely expressive’, because purposive behavior may also be expressive). A desire is manifested in purposive behavior when the agent who has the desire engages in goal directed behavior: the agent acts so as to bring about what the desire is a desire for and adapts its behavior to that end. The adaptation of behaviour is shaped by the agent’s exercise of its cognitive abilities; that is to say, the agent directs its behavior according to its cognition of the circumstances – cognition that may be perceptual or of some other kind (for instance, inferential), and may or may not involve the manipulation of concepts. In cases where the agent is not capable of concept manipulation (most animals), cognition shapes behavior through the discriminatory capacities of the agent. In cases of agents capable of concept manipulation whose desires are manifested in purposive action, cognition can shape behavior in several ways: in the conceptualization of the object of desire; in reasoning about whether and how to satisfy the desire; and in the exercise of the range of cognitive capacities (perceptual, inferential, perhaps intuitive, etc.) required to guide his or her behavior towards the intended goal. In such cases, purposive behavior is not only goal directed but also typically guided by reasons (See Döring this volume).

Accordingly, the desire to eat can be manifested in eating but also in food searching and grabbing behavior, both of which are *purposive* behavior; and in the case of humans, the desire to eat can also be manifested in linguistic expressions – which may be purposive or merely expressive (see below). Likewise, a desire to buy a car may be manifested in buying a car, but it can also be manifested in actions conducive to doing so, for instance, in finding out about the different virtues of various cars; saving money to buy a car, perhaps by foregoing other purchases, and so on.

Desires are also manifested in behavior that is not purposive but is, as I noted above, merely *expressive*. For example, the desire to eat may be manifested in crying (for instance, in babies), meowing (in cats) and, for adult humans, as suggested above, in linguistic ways, such as the exclamation ‘I’m hungry!’. Similarly, the desire to buy a car may be manifested in talking about cars, expressions (e.g. linguistic or facial expressions) of disappointment when finding out that car taxes have gone up, such as looking sad, or cursing; or in expressions of joy, such as smiling, laughing or cheering, when realizing that one can now afford the desired car or that one is about to buy it.

A distinctive feature of desires is that, at least for humans (I leave aside whether this is also true of any other animals), it is often possible to *suppress* what would be a behavioral manifestation of a desire one has – for instance, by choosing not to act in ways that would lead to the satisfaction of the desire, by suppressing its linguistic expression and even voicing a contrary or contradictory desire, or by suppressing the expression of the associated emotions: hiding one’s disappointment or anger, pretending or declaring that one feels the opposite emotion, and so on. In other words, agents can sometimes choose whether to manifest their desires behaviourally.

Desires also have, I suggested above, external but non-behavioral manifestations – which are

manifestations that are not typically under our control: we can neither bring them about nor suppress them at will, though we can often do things at will that will result in the occurrence of those sorts of changes. These manifestations may be purely physiological changes, or they may be changes tied to emotions such as fear, joy, anxiety, etc. For example, desires may be manifested in bodily changes such as salivation or tummy rumblings (purely physiological), or in trembling (with fear), blushing (in anger), or getting flushed (with excitement) at the thought or sight of what one wants, or of getting it, or of losing it, and so on.

So much for the external manifestations of desires. The internal manifestations of desires include thoughts (contemplative, imaginative, calculative, etc.), emotional reactions, mental images, and sensations and feelings of various kinds. The sensations that manifest a desire may be those that accompany related thoughts and emotions, such as feelings of fear, anticipation or delight, or sensations associated with bodily appetites, etc. And the thoughts, mental images or daydreams that constitute manifestations of a desire may be of the kind that come unbidden, or they may be the result of intentional mental activity, such as purposeful deliberation or imagining. Thus, my engaging in deliberation about how to achieve something and the relative costs of doing so, etc. and my deliberately imagining satisfying the desire can also be manifestations of a desire, as can be one's emotional reactions and feelings to these (See Schroeder, this volume, on deliberation concerning desires).

When desires are manifested in this internal way, they may also be manifested externally and so the desire may be attributed to the agent on the basis of those external manifestations. But regardless of whether desires are externally manifested or not, these internal phenomena may constitute manifestations of a desire, if only to oneself: my well-concealed feelings of envy on hearing of a friend's professional success may make me realize that, contrary to what I thought, I do want to achieve professional recognition. In such cases, I may then see some of

my past actions in a new light, e.g. see them as directed at achieving such recognition and hence as manifestations of my desire. But it is also possible that the feeling of envy should be the first manifestation of my desire. Because of this, it is possible that sometimes only its possessor may be in a position to recognize that she has a certain desire, although this is by no means always the case. Indeed, often the opposite is true: others can be in a position to tell us about unacknowledged desires by witnessing their various external manifestations. And of course sometimes oneself and others may misinterpret manifestations of a desire for A as those of a desire for B. And so on.

Desires have this range of internal and external manifestations partly because desires are linked to pleasure and pain in various ways. So desiring is a state that often brings with it pain or displeasure, whether in the form of a sensation, or a negative psychological state, such as frustration, fear, annoyance, etc., which may arise from the as-yet unsatisfied desire or from the frustration of the desire. The satisfaction of desire typically brings with it (a degree of) pleasure, as does the anticipation of satisfaction. To be sure, sometimes the satisfaction of a desire is disappointing (for instance, less pleasant than one expected); distasteful (one may be disgusted with oneself and/or feel sick after having given in to a desire to eat three cream doughnuts; or after doing something one felt one had to do, and in that sense wanted to do but also found repugnant to do); or regarded by the agent as an outright disaster (perhaps very little pleasure and much pain comes from the satisfaction of the desire). Still, there is often some pleasure in getting what one wants even if it is very short-lived, and if the pleasure merely consists in the assuaging of the discomfort or frustration of desiring; and repugnance or distaste may be mixed with the pleasure of having done one's duty, or having got an unpleasant task out of the way, and so on. Moreover, even when there is very little and short-lived pleasure, there tends to be some pleasure in the anticipation of satisfaction. Thus, pleasure, pain or displeasure (physical or psychological)

cause, are caused by and manifested in purposive behavior (towards or away from the object), expressive behavior, emotional reactions, feelings, thoughts, etc.

So we have seen that desires can be manifested externally in purposive behavior (including in actions done for reasons), in expressive behavior, or in physiological changes; and also internally in certain patterns of thoughts, sensations, emotional reactions, etc. which may, in turn, be externally expressed.

It could be objected that, although in a sense of the word ‘manifestation’ that means simply ‘making evident’ these are all possible ways in which desires are manifested, they are not all manifestations of a desire in the sense of ‘manifestation’ relevant to a disposition. For dispositions, the thought goes, are defined by their manifestations, so fragility is the disposition to break in certain circumstances, and solubility is the disposition to dissolve, etc.⁹ But it seems that some of the possible manifestations I have described above, such as thoughts, feelings or physiological changes, are not ‘defining’ of say, the desire to marry someone, or to kiss them.¹⁰ However, while characterizing what counts as the manifestation of a disposition is relatively easy in cases of simple dispositions, such as fragility or solubility (what Ryle calls ‘single-track dispositions’, see Ryle 1948, 44), the task is complicated when the disposition is something like a desire or a belief because, as Ryle says, they are dispositions ‘the exercises of which are indefinitely heterogeneous’ (44). To illustrate the point, Ryle says:

When Jane Austen wished to show the specific kind of pride which characterised the heroine of ‘Pride and Prejudice’, she had to represent her actions, words, thoughts and feelings in a thousand different situations. There is no one standard type of action or reaction such that Jane Austen could say ‘My heroine’s kind of pride was just the tendency to do this, whenever a situation of that sort arose’ (44).

So although actions, and among them ‘overt’ actions (i.e. those involving bodily behavior), are a central way in which desires are manifested, they are not the only way, and so there is no reason to disregard the other possible ways in which they are manifested. Because of this, it should now be clear that our initial question about how desires explain actions should be illuminated by exploring generally the nature of the relationship between desiring something and the whole range of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ manifestations of that desire, since the range includes intentional actions. I turn to that question in the next section, where I argue that there is a feature of the relationship between desires and their manifestations that sets them apart from ordinary physical dispositions often discussed in the literature, such as solubility, elasticity, fragility, etc..¹¹

3. Desires as ‘manifestation-dependent’ dispositions

The *SEP* entry for dispositions says that ‘in general, it seems that nothing about the *actual* behavior of an object is ever necessary for it to have the dispositions it has’ (Sungho, 2004). This is clearly intended as a claim about the concept of a disposition, and the term ‘actual behavior’ is meant to include not just the current or past actual behavior, but the actual behavior of an object over its lifetime. So a particular thing may have a disposition such as fragility or solubility even if the thing itself never has and never will manifest it. Thus, a particular lump of sugar or pinch of salt is said to be soluble (have a disposition to dissolve in certain conditions), a particular glass vase or a ceramic tile is said to be fragile (disposed to break under certain kinds of stress) even if they never have and never will dissolve or break. Typically these dispositions have categorical basis as well as certain necessary conditions for their manifestation (conditions that enable the disposition to be manifested), as well as

requiring a stimulus or trigger that brings about their manifestation –¹² though it has proved singularly difficult to specify what these conditions and triggers are, even for fairly simple dispositions, such as for fragility, as is shown by the failures so far of attempts to provide a satisfactory conditional analysis of dispositions.¹³ This is because an object or portion of stuff can have a disposition that is not manifested even when the trigger occurs, because of the presence of masks, antidotes or finks and, in such cases, the failure of manifestation does not imply the absence of the disposition. The recent literature on dispositions is full of such examples: fragile glasses wrapped in Styrofoam that do not shatter when struck, poisonous pills that do not poison if ingested together with an antidote, ‘finked’ live wires that don’t conduct electricity when electric currents are applied, and so on.¹⁴ So a particular may have a disposition it never manifests, either because it is never in the required conditions (enabling conditions, plus trigger), or perhaps because it is but something blocks or otherwise prevents its manifestation. The important point for my purposes is that a particular thing may have a disposition that it never manifests.

By contrast, there seem to be dispositions that are what might be called ‘manifestation-dependent’: the absence of the manifestation over the lifetime of the object implies the absence of the disposition. That is, contrary to what the *SEP* entry quoted above says, there are dispositions that an individual has only if it has already manifested it at some point over its lifetime. And this dependence of the disposition on its manifestation is not epistemic; that is, it is not that in the absence of the manifestation we cannot know whether the object has the disposition. Rather, the dependence is constitutive – certain types of disposition are not present if they are not manifested: it is part of the concept of a disposition of this kind that its presence implies its manifestation at some point in the past. These dispositions imply not just that its possessor would or has the power to do certain things or to undergo certain changes in certain circumstances but that it *has done* those things or *undergone* those changes. Being a

smoker and being generous, for example are such dispositions: a smoker is someone who has a disposition to smoke even while he's not smoking but someone who has never smoked is not a smoker, just as someone may be generous without now manifesting that character trait in any way but someone who has never had a generous reaction, thought or feeling, or has never performed a generous deed is not generous.¹⁵ The point about these dispositions is not that they are frequently manifested but rather that, unlike other dispositions, attribution of the disposition depends (logically) on its having been manifested.

I want to suggest that desires are dispositions of this kind. My claim is that it is part of the concept of desire that someone has a desire at time *t*, only if the desire has been manifested *in any of the various ways* I described above at some point up to and including time *t*. So I have the desire to eat spinach or to become a barrister, only if at some point up to the present I have manifested that desire in any of the ways described above (but of course not necessarily in behavior). Desires are dispositions such that someone who has a desire is someone of whom it is true, not just that she would or can do certain things, but that she *has* done or is doing certain things: has had or is having certain thoughts, feelings and emotions, or has behaved or is behaving in certain ways, etc..

Note that I am not suggesting that desires are dependent on any *one* of the possible ways in which they are manifested, whether internally or externally, for they clearly are not: someone can have a desire in the absence of a manifestation of any one or several of those kinds. So one may have the desire to eat without acting on the desire but not without at least thinking about it, or having certain feelings, sensations, etc.; or one may want to put out the washing without feeling particularly emotionally engaged in the issue and one may want to become a dentist without really thinking about it at the time or experiencing any sensations relating to it; but in both cases there must still be some other way in which the desire has been or is being

manifested. The literature is full of examples where a desire is plausibly claimed to be present in the absence of one or several of these sorts of typical manifestations; and this has in fact led to competing views about what is essential to the concept of desire.¹⁶ Rather, my point is that the concept of desire is in fact essentially connected to the range of phenomena that constitute their possible manifestations and, therefore, that an agent cannot (conceptually) have a desire in the absence of *all* of those manifestations over the agent's lifetime: the range of possible manifestations is constitutive of the concept of having a desire. Moreover, the various manifestations of a desire are criteria for the *strength* of desire: the more one feels inclined to satisfy a desire (i.e. the harder it is to suppress the relevant purposive behavior), the stronger the associated sensations, emotions, the more acute the physiological changes, the more frequent related thoughts about it and relatedly, the harder it is to suppress the associated expressive behavior, the stronger the desire. Desires are, then, a kind of manifestation-dependent disposition.

It might be objected that this alleged difference from ordinary dispositions is only apparent. For, it might be argued, just as an object may have an ordinary physical disposition but not manifest it because it is not in the right conditions, or because of the presence of a mask, antidote, fink, etc., that blocks its manifestation, a person may have a desire that she has never manifested because of the presence of a mask or antidote, for instance because of injury, paralysis, physical coercion, perhaps contrary desires, etc.. And, therefore, as with other dispositions, the failure of manifestation does not imply the absence of the disposition, i.e. of the desire.

However, there is an important difference concerning the possibility of preventing the manifestation of the disposition between the two types of case. For it is true that one can prevent external manifestation of desires, for example by paralyzing someone, but even then

it will still be possible for the desire to be manifested in thoughts, emotions, etc.. And so, in order to prevent or block all possible manifestations of a desire, the person must be incapable of thought or feeling, so she must be either totally unconscious (i.e. in a total coma) or dead. The dead have no desires,¹⁷ and, while a totally unconscious person may still have the desires she had before entering that state, those desires will be attributed to her on the basis of her having been manifested them somehow in the past. On the other hand, it is implausible to argue that she can acquire new desires during her coma. To be sure, she could express a new desire on waking up but there's no grounds for saying that she had the desire but did not manifest it while in a coma, rather than that she acquired the desire and expressed it on waking up. In other words, it is implausible to argue that a person can be in a state that makes it impossible for her to manifest her desires in any way but can, during that time, acquire new desires. Thus the objection fails: although preventing the *external* manifestation of a desire in whatever way (physical injury, paralysis, etc.) does not imply its absence, the fact that a desire has never been manifested in any internal or external way does: that is simply part of the concept of desire.¹⁸

This may seem unconvincing for surely, it might be argued, it is possible for one to discover that one had a desire one didn't know about. For instance, mention or perception of the object of desire may elicit certain reactions, internal or external, which evince the presence of a desire that, until then, perhaps no one, including the agent herself, knew she had. And surely the right way to construe such cases is to say that these reactions (internal or external) are evidence for its antecedent presence: the desire was there all along and the reactions simply reveal its existence. But this is also implausible. First, if the object of desire is something the agent was not at all familiar with, then it is wholly implausible to suggest that the agent's reaction is a manifestation of a desire that was there all along. It is true that a person may desire something, say, to have peace of mind and discover that something else, say, retiring is

just what she'd always wanted because it brings peace of mind. That, however, is not discovering a desire she has always had but never manifested. It is rather discovering that a desire she'd manifested (perhaps in certain feelings of unhappiness, or thoughts and actions about how to get peace of mind) could be satisfied in ways she didn't know about. If, by contrast, the object of desire is something already familiar to the agent, then it is wholly implausible to say that in the absence of any previous relevant thoughts, emotions, behavior, etc., the agent already had the desire for that thing because, again, there seem to be no grounds for attributing an antecedent desire, rather than a newly acquired desire. To be sure, reflection on some already familiar object of desire may help one to remember or perhaps *recognize* past emotional and thought patterns as manifestations of a desire for that thing (or of aversion to it) but then that is a desire that *had* already been manifested. So desires are manifestation-dependent dispositions.

This feature of desires does not impugn the dispositional nature of desires, since a desire that has been manifested in one way can still be regarded as a dispositional state that could be further manifested in other ways.¹⁹ But, and this is the point I want to emphasize, this feature does mark desires (along with some other psychological states) off from dispositions such as fragility, solubility, or conductivity, which may be present in an object despite the object's never having manifested them in any way. For in the case of desires, the presence of the acquisition of a desire, the disposition, coincides with at least one of its manifestation. This, it may be thought, is odd, as there do not seem to be other dispositions that are acquired only at the point at which they are first manifested. But that is gist to the mill: if desires are dispositions, they, together with at least some other psychological states, have some peculiar features which seem to set them apart from the familiar physical dispositions.

Conclusion

As I noted at the beginning of the paper, a very familiar view about how desires explain actions is that they do so just as dispositions in general explain their manifestations. And dispositions are said to explain their manifestations causally: dispositions are antecedent causal conditions which, when triggered by some stimulus, cause their manifestations to occur. We have seen, however, that desires are a distinctive kind of disposition, what I have called ‘manifestation-dependent’ dispositions. And that this means that attributions of desires are best understood as partly records of present or past occurrences (internal or external) and partly as grounds for predictions of what the agent who has the desire is likely to think, feel, do, etc.. I want to finish the paper with the suggestion that this feature of desires means that one illuminating way of thinking of how desires explain actions is by seeing those actions as part of an intelligible pattern formed by the agent’s past and future behavior, thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. in the context in which the agent acted, a pattern that we regard as the manifestation of the desire in question. Because of this, at any point, *which* desire should be attributed to an agent as explanatory of her action is importantly constrained by whether the action fits best into one or another of the intelligible patterns of manifestation of the different desires that the agent can be plausibly thought to have given the context. The suggestion is that given the nature of desires, there is more to be said in favor of the view that explanation of action by reference to desires are ‘context-placing’ explanations.²⁰ These remarks about desires do not of course constitute anything like an account of how desires explain actions but I hope to have provided grounds for thinking that thinking of them in the way suggested may be a fruitful way of going about that task.²¹

Keywords

Ontology of desire; Desire as state; Desire as propositional attitude; Manifestation of desire; Dispositions; Manifestation-dependent dispositions; Explanation of action.

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¹ Davidson adds that, although we are not always in a position to know what the triggering event was, we know that there must have been one. And this is true for explanations of inanimate events, which we take to be causal, as well as for action explanations.

² C.B. Martin, for example, writes: ‘The fact that belief and desire states are dispositional is both familiar and obvious’ (Martin, 2008, 184). This is a widespread view in the literature on dispositions, see e.g. McKittrick 2004, 2. In the philosophy of mind, different views highlight different concepts in order to characterise desires: behaviour, pleasure/pain, the good, reward, etc. (see T. Schroeder, 2004). But most, if not all, of those views are compatible with the idea that desires are dispositional states.

³ The view is widely but not universally held. It has been rejected by some who argue, for example, that it is a disposition’s causal basis, rather than the disposition, that is causally relevant, or causally efficacious. The rejection is implicit in David Lewis’s remark that, if one takes dispositions to be distinct from their bases: ‘I take for granted that a disposition requires

a certain causal basis: one has the disposition iff one has a property that occupies a certain causal role' (Lewis, 1986, 223-4. See also Prior, Pargeter & Jackson, 1982). The causal role that the causal basis of a disposition plays is precisely to bring about the manifestation of the disposition. I put aside this objection because, if right, it applies to all dispositions and not just to desires, which is the topic at issue. For a critical discussion of this suggestion see McKittrick, 2004..

⁴ Desires are also sometimes thought of as 'propositional attitudes' (following Russell 1918, [2010, 60].) This characterization, however, is not ideal, as I and others have argued (See Schueler, 1991 , Zangwill, 1998 and Alvarez 2010, 66ff .) Briefly, it cannot accommodate the desires of creatures who lack the ability to entertain propositions, such as babies and (most?) non-human animals (See also Döring and Friedrich, this volume).

⁵ A disposition may also be manifested in preventing, sustaining, etc. changes or processes that would otherwise occur – but this sort of manifestation is also in principle observable. For ease of exposition I shall talk of manifestations as occurrences but using the term to include all these things.

⁶ 'Observable occurrences' is here to be contrasted with the internal manifestations I outline in the main text. There are also neuro-physiological changes inside the body correlated with desires that I do not include these among the 'internal' manifestations partly because they are in principle also observable - though not without the aid of a special apparatus. Internal physiological changes could also count as, in some sense, external 'manifestations' of a state of desiring – at least in the sense that they are correlated with the presence of the desire. But it matters that the identification of such neuro-physiological changes as 'manifestations' of a particular desire depends on their correlation with the external and internal manifestations described in the main text.

⁷ Schwitzgebel, 2002 makes a similar point about the manifestation of beliefs. This view is found also in Quine, 1990.

⁸ I use the term ‘purposive behavior’ to include intentional behavior, which is typically what we do for reasons (though there may be things done intentionally but not for a reason), but also the behavior of animals that are not capable of reasoning. And the term ‘behavior’ is intended to include linguistic behavior, as well as refrainings, etc. (see Alvarez, 2013).

⁹ In saying this I am not endorsing the possibility of a conditional analysis of a disposition in terms of trigger, circumstances and manifestation.

¹⁰ So, for example, John Hyman writes:

a desire is manifested in two main ways: first, by purposive or goal-directed behaviour, specifically, behaviour aimed at satisfying the desire, in other words, at getting what it is a desire to have, or at doing what it is a desire to do; and second, by feeling glad, pleased or relieved if the desire is satisfied, and sorry, displeased or disappointed if it is frustrated (Hyman, 2014, 85).

And he adds that there are other things related to desires that may be signs or symptoms of desires but these are not manifestations of the desire. But even if it’s right the mere physiological changes are not manifestations but only signs or symptoms of desire, Hyman’s range of possible manifestations seems too narrow. For in addition to purposive acting and feelings, there is a range of (intentional and non-intentional) mental activity as well as expressive non-purposive behavior that seem legitimate candidates to be counted among possible manifestations of a desire. Unless we have a principled way of deciding what is a genuine manifestation of a desire, the claim that only goal-directed behavior and feelings of pleasure or displeasure concerning its satisfaction or frustration count as manifestations seems a stipulation.

¹¹ The distinctive feature is also had by other psychological dispositional states, for instance, character traits, and perhaps beliefs, although I shall not discuss either of those here.

¹² ‘Typically’ because it is claimed that there are physical dispositions which are unusual in that e.g. they ‘manifest spontaneously, without the need for stimulation’ (Molnar, 2003, 85), or others that do not have a categorical base (See McKittrick, 2003, Molnar, 2003, and Mumford 2006. But see Armstrong, 1968).

¹³ See Martin, 2008, ch.2.

¹⁴ See Cross, 2012 for a summary.

¹⁵ I have argued for this view of character traits in ‘Ryle on Motives and Dispositions’ (in *Ryle on Mind and Language*, Palgrave, 2015).

¹⁶ Thus, some philosophers have privileged one of these concepts (action, pleasure, conscious thoughts, etc.) over others in characterising desires, or have even claimed that the preferred concept is what desires reduce to. Recently, Tim Schroeder (2004) has criticised many traditional positions and proposed an alternative, based on the idea that desire is ‘a natural kind’ essentially linked to the concept of reward (though the somewhat technical concept of ‘reward’ deployed in the empirical literature he discusses.). It is not possible to do justice Schroeder’s arguments here but it is worth noting that his criticisms of the rival theories he examines are not effective against the sort of pluralist conception of desires suggested above.

¹⁷ I’m putting aside the possibility of life after death because if there is such a thing, one would be able to manifest one’s desires then, if only in thought.

¹⁸ It seems, moreover, that desires have no necessary triggers for their manifestation. The presence of the object of desire may sometimes act as a trigger for the desire to be manifested but one may manifest a desire in the absence of the object of desire or anything connected to

it; indeed, the manifestation may consists precisely in spontaneously imagining, thinking about, or seeking the object of desire (say water, or a new house) in spite of its total absence in the agent's environment, indeed, in spite of its non-existence. I do not mean that nothing will have triggered these thoughts, images, etc. but rather that that there is no kind of occurrence that is necessary to trigger the manifestation of a desire. Perhaps desires fall under what Molnar calls 'unconditional dispositions' (2003, 85), which are dispositions that do not require special conditions or triggers for their manifestation: their manifestation may be triggered by some stimulus but they may also manifest spontaneously.

¹⁹ Of course if the desire is satisfied it will not be manifested further but then it is a desire that the agent no longer has. Note that to have what one wants need not be to have one's desire satisfied if one's desire is, e.g. to keep what one has.

²⁰ My suggestion is in the same spirit as those in Schroeder 2001 and Tanney, 2009. I do not take the remarks above, however, to constitute an argument against the claim that reason/desire explanations are causal, not least because the truth of the claim depends largely on what makes an explanation causal, an issue that seems to me far from straightforward.

²¹ I would like to thank Edgar Phillips and the editors of this collection for very helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.